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Abstract

In the context of recent debates about surface reading, critical description, and symptomatic interpretation, this article argues that the work of the philosopher and literary theorist, Richard Rorty, can open up new methodological possibilities for critics concerned with theories and practices of close reading. I suggest that, though Rorty's own textual analyses routinely fail to respond to the aesthetic distinctiveness of the works he discusses, his accounts of "inspired reading" and "liberal irony" together pave the way for a more compelling critical practice. To substantiate this claim, the second half of the article offers a new reading of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, a novel that, perhaps more concertedly than any other, raises fundamental questions about reading and interpretation.

Close Reading, Epistemology, and Affect: Nabokov After Rorty

We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing.

— Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*¹

In recent years, literary critics have revisited basic disciplinary questions about how texts can or should be read with particular urgency. This article argues that the work of the philosopher and literary theorist, Richard Rorty, can open up new methodological possibilities for critics concerned with theories and practices of close reading.² Though his work has garnered much interest across the humanities and social sciences, as Gunter Leypoldt points out, “Rorty’s authority as a literary scholar has remained ambiguous.”³ I will suggest that critics are right to be sceptical about the value of Rorty’s literary scholarship, primarily because his readings of particular works routinely fail to register and respond to their aesthetic distinctiveness, what Derek Attridge has called the “singularity” of literature.⁴ Nevertheless, this article will also suggest that Rorty’s under-discussed characterization of “inspired reading,” together with his account of “liberal irony,” can help us rethink our critical priorities and purposes in the context of current debates about surface reading, critical description, and symptomatic interpretation, recently described by Rita Felski as “the method wars.”⁵ Such a reassessment makes available a more compelling critical practice—one that is more explicitly concerned with the affective investments that compel a critic to care and write about a given work in the first place; that is more willing to admit and explore the implications of the myriad ways that texts elude understanding; and that is more

pragmatist about the disciplinary “knowledge” of what literary works are.

To demonstrate this, I turn to the fiction of Vladimir Nabokov, which has caused no end of interpretative trouble for readers and critics. Rorty famously devoted a chapter of one of his most influential works, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), to *Lolita* (1955) and *Pale Fire* (1962), arguing that cruelty is “the worst thing we do,” and that Nabokov’s novels “warn the liberal ironist intellectual”—the hero of Rorty’s philosophy—“against temptations to be cruel.”⁶ For Rorty at least, then, there is a close affinity between his and Nabokov’s thought. Despite an initial flurry of interest, however, Rorty’s discussion has not had a lasting impact on Nabokov criticism, ordinarily meriting no more than a passing reference in recent commentaries—a reception indicative of wider feelings about Rorty in literary studies today.⁷ The latter part of this article aims to illustrate the value of Rorty’s thought for contemporary criticism through a short discussion of *Pale Fire*—a novel which concertedly raises questions about reading, and which represents Nabokov’s most recalcitrant and alluring work of fiction.⁸ My reassessment of the tenor and tone of Rorty’s writings on literature, as well as the disparity between his theoretical pronouncements and his critical practice, makes it necessary to quote more extensively than is usually desirable in an essay of this kind.

I

“Most philosophers,” Rorty cheerfully suggested in 2002, “typically have one set of ideas which they repeat over and over again,” and he was no exception.⁹ Rorty’s idea, first articulated in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), consists of two interrelated polemics: that philosophers should abandon a representationalist

epistemology which conceives knowledge as the accurate representation of reality, and that they should also abandon a correspondence theory of truth, where sentences are deemed true by virtue of corresponding to the way things “really” are.¹⁰ In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty summarized this argument by distinguishing between “the world,” which exists “out there” and is not solely a human creation, and “truth,” understood as a property of language: “To say that the truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations. ... Only descriptions of the world can be true or false” (*CIS*, p. 5). For the “ironist,” no description or interpretation is intrinsically closer to reality than any other, though descriptions can be more or less useful for different purposes. It is in the context of advocating for the value of a multitude of diverse descriptions that Rorty accords literature a special importance in human culture: “A sense of human history as the history of successive metaphors would let us see the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species” (*CIS*, p. 20). Thus, a persistent trope in Rorty’s oeuvre is about the need to change the conversation—to stop asking questions about truth and reality, and instead ask questions like: “Does our use of these words get in the way of our use of those other words?” (*CIS*, p. 12).¹¹

Rorty was right to characterize most of his writings after *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as defenses of his arguments in that book or elaborations about what a post-epistemological culture—later a “poeticized” (*CIS*, p. 53) or “literary” culture—might look like.¹² In the middle phase of his career, when the emphasis on literature was greatest, this primarily involved exploring the consequences for ethics once epistemology has fallen by the wayside. For Rorty’s liberal ironist, questions such as

“Why not be cruel?” or “Is it right to deliver n innocents over to be tortured to save the lives of $m \times n$ other innocents? If so, what are the correct values of n and m ?” are simply not worth asking:

Anybody who thinks that there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of question—algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas of this sort—is still, in his heart, a theologian or a metaphysician. He believes in an order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities. (*C/S*, p. xv)

When examining the intersection between his rejection of epistemology and his account of ethics, Rorty places a special emphasis on the novel, which he described as “the genre which gives us most help in grasping the variety of human life and the contingency of our own moral vocabulary.”¹³ In “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” Rorty comes closest to articulating a theory of the novel. “The novelist’s substitute for the appearance-reality distinction,” he suggests, “is a display of diversity of viewpoints, a plurality of descriptions of the same events. ... What [the novelist] finds most heroic is not the ability sternly to reject all descriptions save one, but rather the ability to move back and forth between them.”¹⁴ As a consequence of this celebration of a plurality of descriptions, Rorty later suggested, in a manner significantly reminiscent of Paul de Man, that the “more poetic” a text is, “the less easy it is to make it bear an unambiguous interpretation.”¹⁵

II

Given Rorty's characterizations of literature and his claims for its importance, we might expect his discussions of specific works to focus on striking new metaphors, linguistic ambiguities, or shifts in perspective or vocabulary, but what we in fact get is something rather different. His introduction to *Pale Fire*, for instance, contains no responses to or analyses of Nabokov's very particular language. Instead, Rorty describes how "the reader" thinks and feels about various parts of the novel: we are "absorbed" by the "odd but charming" foreword, to which the poem is "a slightly unfortunate interruption"; we "find ourselves sharing Kinbote's overwhelming disappointment" that John Shade's poem was not about Zembla; amidst the thrill of Kinbote's tale, we inadvertently forget about the deaths of the poet and his daughter; and, as a consequence of this lapse, we end the novel "wondering whether we like ourselves."¹⁶ Rorty makes no allowance for the possibility that some people might not read *Pale Fire* sequentially (perhaps reading the poem before the foreword, or flicking between poem and commentary), let alone the possibility that readers might have diverse interests, pleasures, and moral sentiments. His conclusion is no less didactic: at the end of Nabokov's novel, "we shall realize that we, like him and like everybody else, have both Shade-like and Kinbote-like sides. ... Nabokov helps us remember that we can only respect what we can notice, and that it is often very hard for us to notice that other people are suffering."¹⁷

This conclusion might sound familiar to readers of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, where Rorty similarly claims that "the moral [of *Lolita*] is not to keep one's hands off little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering" (*CIS*, p. 164). Perhaps Rorty thought all Nabokov's novels have the same "moral"; but what of his readings of other authors?

George Orwell was apparently also concerned with “sensitizing an audience to cases of cruelty and humiliation which they had not noticed” (*C/S*, p. 173); Charles Dickens “was interested ... in making us aware of forms of suffering that we might have overlooked”; and Henry James “is good at showing us what it is like to notice things about other people—their needs, their fears, their self-descriptions, their descriptions of other people—which we are usually too egotistic to take account of.”¹⁸ Simon Stow is right to point out the conflict between these “non-ironic readings of literary texts,” which allow for only “one possible interpretation,” and Rorty’s philosophical belief in there being no single, “true” description of the world.¹⁹ But more damning for literary critics is the dull reiteration across readings of disparate works; E. D. Hirsch is not alone in proclaiming Rorty “a very fine literary critic,” but it is difficult to escape the conclusion that a critic who has the same ideas about such rich and diverse texts is not a particularly good reader.²⁰

The principal reason that Rorty’s interpretations fail to register the distinctiveness of the works he discusses, I suggest, is the absence of close reading—or, more precisely, the absence of close reading that attends to the stylistic or formal qualities of a text, rather than only its narrative.²¹ On reflection, the preeminent status Rorty accords the novel form seems to be due less to its capacity to re-describe the familiar in strikingly new ways—a capacity poetry surely possesses to an equal if not greater degree—and more to its receptiveness to the kind of allegorical reading of narrative he was uninterested in moving beyond. In “The Pragmatist’s Progress,” a response to Umberto Eco’s essays on interpretation and overinterpretation, Rorty even criticizes de Man and J. Hillis Miller for valuing close reading so highly:

I see the idea that you can learn about “how the text works” by using semiotics

to analyse its operation as like spelling out certain word-processing subroutines in BASIC: you can do it if you want to, but it is not clear why, for most of the purposes which motivate literary critics, you should bother.²²

To understand why Rorty is so dismissive of the practice of close reading, it is necessary to examine his understanding of both interpretation and the motivations of literary critics. The following section will consider Rorty's more familiar, and not especially fruitful, account of "strong textualism," which clumsily applies the pragmatist premise that knowledge is made rather than found, before turning to his more suggestive and interesting description of "inspired reading."

III

In an early essay, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," Rorty describes his ideal pragmatist reader, the "strong textualist," who abandons the notion that "the secret of the text" can be discovered, and "asks neither the author nor the text about their intention."²³ Instead, this reader "simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his purpose ... by imposing a vocabulary ... on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used by the text or its author, and seeing what happens."²⁴ Rorty would later elaborate this view in "The Pragmatist's Progress," where he argues against Eco's distinction between "interpreting" and "using":

Reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what

happens. What happens may be ... so exciting and convincing that one has the illusion that one now sees what a certain text is *really* about. But what excites and convinces is a function of the needs and purposes of those who are being excited and convinced. So it seems to me simpler to scrap the distinction between using and interpreting, and just distinguish between uses by different people for different purposes. (PP, pp. 105-6)

Rorty's rejection of certainty and his insistence on the provisional nature of knowledge are all well and good, and would no doubt be accepted by many philosophically-sophisticated critics. But what Rorty fails to recognize here is that many (and likely most) critics are motivated precisely by the desire to read and produce interpretations which are "so exciting and convincing that one has the illusion that one now sees what a certain text is *really* about"—and, for this purpose, close reading remains one of our best tools. In fact, the feeling of discovering the "secret" of a text, however provisional or illusory that feeling might be, is one of the great allures of criticism.²⁵ Rorty cynically and, I think, wrongly supposes that critics are not concerned with what he calls the intentions of a text, and what we might call its singularity, its distinctiveness as a literary work. As Nicholas M. Gaskill points out in his discussion of pragmatism and literature: "There are some relations and reconstitutions a poem simply will not sustain; texts, like other things in the world, push back."²⁶

Attridge deftly illustrates how scepticism about the possibility of a final interpretation can be held alongside a deep concern with doing justice to the distinctiveness of a given work. Rhetorically posing the question of whether there is such a thing as a "correct" interpretation of a literary text, Attridge suggests that:

If “correct” means “fixed for all time,” then there isn’t, for the obvious reason that the meaning of a work changes as the context within which it is read changes But if “correct” means “appropriate to the time and place in which the reading takes place,” then the term has some purchase. At least it makes sense to have a discussion about the correctness of this or that reading of a text; there may be no final resolution, but we know the kinds of evidence that would be considered valid at the time of the discussion, and disagreements, if not abolished, can be refined. The dispute may turn out to be about the kind of correctness being sought—correctness for what purpose or in what arena.²⁷

By contrast with Attridge, Rorty’s unwillingness to recognize that, for the purposes of literary criticism, some interpretations are more or less justified than others in certain contexts underpins his dismissal of close reading. The absence of close attention to “how the text works” results in reductive and didactic readings of richly varied works, and is ultimately why Rorty’s authority as a literary critic has rightly remained questionable.

IV

Despite apparently condoning critics who impose their own interests and vocabularies onto literary texts, however, Rorty also offers another, very different account of literary criticism in “The Pragmatist’s Progress,” premised on a distinction between what he calls “methodical” and “inspired” reading:

This is [the difference] between knowing what you want to get out of a person

or thing or text in advance and hoping that the person or thing or text will help you want something different—that he or she or it will help you to change your purposes, and thus to change your life. ... Methodical readings are ... the sort of thing you get, for example, in an anthology of readings on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which I recently slogged through None of the readers had, as far as I could see, been enraptured or destabilized by *Heart of Darkness*. I got no sense that the book had made a big difference to them, that they cared much

Unmethodical criticism of the sort which one occasionally wants to call “inspired” is the result of an encounter with an author, character, plot, stanza, line or archaic torso which has made a difference to the critic's conception of who she is, what she is good for, what she wants to do with herself: an encounter which has rearranged her priorities and purposes. (PP, pp. 106-7)

Rorty conspicuously refuses to show us what inspired reading looks like, and consigns his own interpretation of Eco's novel earlier in the essay to the methodical dustbin. His readings of Nabokov, Orwell, Dickens, James, and Proust are likewise “methodical” in this pejorative sense, insofar as Rorty seems to know in advance what he wants to get out of these radically different writers. With respect to Rorty's prescription that critics suspend their prior purposes and priorities and instead be enraptured and destabilized by literature, it is worth noting that, notwithstanding de Man's relative neglect of readerly affect, what he saw as valuable about close reading was precisely its potential to unsettle prior knowledge: “reading texts closely as texts ... start[s] out from the bafflement that ... singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure [are] bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them and honest enough not to hide

their non-understanding behind the screen of received ideas that often passes, in literary instruction, for humanistic knowledge.”²⁸ We might also want to question the binary opposition Rorty draws here; can critics not be methodical *and* inspired? Nevertheless, the particular salience of Rorty’s “inspired reading” for contemporary methodological debates is his emphasis on both arresting the epistemological drive of academic criticism and disclosing the affective dispositions which underlie certain kinds of critical practice.

Rorty would extend this account into a full-blown critique of literary studies, as he saw it (mainly through the eyes of Harold Bloom) in 1995, in his MLA address, “The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature.”²⁹ The thrust of his argument is that, under the influence of Fredric Jameson, literary critics have increasingly adopted an attitude of what Bloom called “resentment” and what Rorty calls “knowingness,” “a state of the soul which prevents shudders of awe,” and which “makes one immune to romantic interest” (IV, p. 126). Rorty juxtaposes “knowingness” with a criticism that aims to “find inspirational value in a text” through this suggestive analogy:

Just as you cannot be swept off your feet by another human being at the same time that you recognize him or her as a good specimen of a certain type, so you cannot simultaneously be inspired by a work and be knowing about it. Later on—when first love has been replaced by marriage—you may acquire the ability to be both at once. But the really good marriages, the inspired marriages, are those which began in wild, unreflective infatuation. (IV, p. 133-4)

As his use of “knowing” in its adjectival form indicates, Rorty objects not only to an excessive emphasis on what critics “know” about texts rather than what they feel about

them, but also to a specific affective orientation towards the literary work; in the place of suspicion and detached sophistication, Rorty wants critics to be enthralled by literature. It is in this mistrust of those who adopt a “knowing” attitude that we find a deeper concord between Rorty’s pragmatist critique of philosophy and his affection for literature and literary criticism, an affection he was unable to translate into a compelling reading practice.

Deidre Shauna Lynch has recently argued that “affective labor” is foundational to literary studies, and that “those of us for whom English is a line of *work* are also called upon to *love* literature.”³⁰ This may be the case, but the more pertinent question is what role love of literature plays, or is allowed to play, in critical writing. Despite the so-called “affective turn” in literary studies (and the humanities more generally), scholars rarely discuss their own feelings about a given work in published criticism.³¹ Felski has recently shown that “styles of academic reading are affective as well as cognitive, inviting us to adopt attitudes of trust, impatience, reverence, or wariness towards the texts we read,” and that “suspicious” interpretation, which like Rorty she associates with the influence of Jameson, “is not just an intellectual exercise in demystification but also a distinctive style and sensibility with its own specific pleasures.”³² Again, this might be the case, but for Rorty, the crucial issue is the relationship—or, as he sees it, the *lack* of relationship—between the pleasures of reading a book and the critic’s written response. There is much to fault with his analogy between reading and loving, not least the uncharacteristic social conservatism (in the suggestion that marriage exemplifies what is most desirable), the rhetoric of romantic enthusiasm, and the very narrow conception of the affects of reading; as de Man suggests, much sensitive criticism emerges from less transformative feelings of surprise, confusion, and delight. Nevertheless, alongside his philosophical account of

“liberal irony,” Rorty’s “inspired reading” offers a new vantage from which to approach the thorny question of how to read and write about literature.

V

The salience of Rorty’s thought for contemporary methodological debates is best demonstrated by briefly considering perhaps the most significant—and certainly the most frequently cited—critical intervention of the last ten years: Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s “surface reading.”³³ It is worth noting that Best and Marcus’s critique of symptomatic interpretation, which they also associate with Jameson, closely resembles Rorty’s complaint about “knowing” criticism. Surface reading immediately raises the question: what *is* the surface of a text, and how might it be meaningfully distinguished from depth?³⁴ Best and Marcus indicate that “surface” is not meant literally, but rather refers to “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*.”³⁵ Though I am sympathetic with their dissatisfaction with the propensity of ideological critique to overlook aesthetic particularity, under this definition, arguably *any* description of a literary work as more than marks on a page or pixels on a screen fails to attend to its “surface.” Kristina Straub is right to point out that “‘surface’ pertains more to what we do with texts than the texts themselves,” but the distinction in critical approaches is predicated on a distinction between the different parts of the text the critic (apparently) attends to.³⁶ My reading of *Pale Fire* will suggest that these kinds of distinctions are frequently impossible and rarely interesting to make. I, for one, have no idea what

about a literary work (or a reading of a literary work) “has length and breadth but no thickness.”³⁷ In a sense, Best and Marcus are too credulous of their own critical metaphors, treating the dichotomy of “surface” and “depth” as a representation (or mirror) of how texts “really” are, rather than a figure that proves useful for critiquing certain kinds of interpretation, and rather less so far articulating alternatives. Following Rorty, it seems to me better to simply slough off the metaphor, which is unhelpfully premised on the notion that the best way of describing texts is in the language of material objects.³⁸ To be more pragmatist about disciplinary “knowledge” is to stop posing quasi-ontological questions about the “nature” of literary works, and instead explore which critical vocabularies prove particularly useful for particular purposes.

The attachment to the figure of surface and depth is also deeply implicated in Best and Marcus’s lack of clarity about what they perceive to be the proper role of truth, knowledge, and affect in criticism. On the one hand, their endeavor to “understand ... critical activity as something other than wresting truths from the hidden depths of resisting texts” seems to disavow truth as a desirable aim, as does their claim that surface reading can mean the “embrace” of “surface as affective and ethical stance.”³⁹ On the other, Best and Marcus seem to want to reinstate truth by relocating it from a text’s depths to its surface: “moments that arrest us in texts need not be considered symptoms, whose true cause exists on another plane of reality, but can themselves indicate important and overlooked truths.”⁴⁰ It is difficult to see why moments that arrest us should necessarily be seen as a matter of truth; readers are very often arrested by the peculiar *language* of a text—a daring combination of linguistic registers or a use of a word which brings into relief its fullest semantic possibilities. Indeed, that we can be moved by what we know to be *not* true is fundamental to fiction’s enduring appeal (as millions of readers can attest), and part

of what is peculiar about reading *Pale Fire* is the strange feeling of being moved by characters whose fictionality is being ostentatiously displayed.

What Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian describe as the empiricist “hedge” of surface reading is most marked—and most problematic—with respect to the interpretative procedure Best and Marcus directly associate with the movement: modes of analysis that employ “minimal critical agency” and prefer “description” to “interpretation.”⁴¹ Ellen Rooney has fiercely critiqued this mode of surface reading for its pretensions to objectivity: “The representation of ‘critical description’ in ‘Surface Reading’ is neither a description of the way we read now nor a description of the way anyone might read, ever.”⁴² This criticism is partly addressed by Best, Marcus, and Heather Love in “Building a Better Description,” where they suggest: “One way to build a better description is to accept the basic critique of objectivity as impossible and undesirable. In response, we might practice forms of description that embrace subjectivity, uncertainty, incompleteness, and partiality.”⁴³ Like Best, Marcus, and Love, I want critical description to be more highly valued in literary studies; in light of Rorty’s “inspired reading,” this article contributes to their cause an argument for a more partial and uncertain mode of description, whose principal concern is elucidating the distinctiveness of a work, and, by extension, why it is that we should care about it in the first place.

The following reading of *Pale Fire* aims to illustrate what a critical practice informed by Rorty’s accounts of “liberal irony” and “inspired reading” might look like. This chiefly amounts to two corresponding shifts in emphasis. Firstly, I aim to take up a less epistemological orientation that is less concerned with questions about what is “really going on” in a text, questions that in Nabokov criticism have resulted in interminable and not especially fruitful debate. In practical terms, this often means a

greater willingness to admit to being uncertain or even bewildered by the text. Secondly, the reading aims to be, if not more devotional, then more up front about the affective investments which impel me to write about Nabokov—because I find his novels beguiling, troubling, and profoundly moving. (When I describe the experience of “the reader” in this article, I am in fact giving an account of my own experience, whilst giving good reasons for supposing that it might speak to the experience of other, similarly attentive, readers—as most other critics are, without acknowledging the fact.) This is a critical practice which ultimately aspires to describe the text in ways that are more closely related to the peculiar pleasures of reading.

VI

Pale Fire raises questions about how it should be read, in several senses of that word, more concerted than perhaps any other novel. Its unusual construction, as foreword, poem, commentary, and index, immediately opens up several possible ways of proceeding; though many critics (including Rorty) assume that everyone begins at the beginning and ends at the end as with most other novels, anecdotal evidence suggests that first-time readers continue to make their way through the text in different ways.⁴⁴ The foreword even recommends that we read the notes first “and then study the poem with their help” (*PF*, p. 28) either by purchasing a second copy or by cutting out the commentary—advice I suspect few readers follow. But beyond the more immediate question of what to read when lies the literary critical question raised by the strangeness of Kinbote’s commentary: what kind of reading, in the sense of a gloss or interpretation, can or should one give of this novel?

Rorty gives a characteristically provocative defense of Kinbote’s own readings:

Kinbote is not “making something up” when he reads the story of Zembla between the lines of Shade’s poem, any more than he is “representing inaccurately.” ... It is important to see that Kinbote *cares* a great deal about Shade’s poem, even if for all the wrong reasons. He thinks very hard about it, even though his thought goes in utterly different directions from Shade’s. This illustrates the point that a perverse, egocentric commentary—what Bloom calls a “strong reading”—is still a commentary ... [and] once we leave the realm of action for that of writing, it is no service to anyone to ask whether a reaction was “appropriate.” (*C/S*, p. 160-1, fn25)

This is Rorty the radically permissive “strong textualist,” rather than the advocate of “inspired reading.” Kinbote’s response to the poem’s description of a “stiff [weather] vane so often visited / by the naïve, the gauzy mockingbird” (*PF*, p. 35) illustrates why we should be sceptical of Rorty’s claim: “*Line 62*: often. — Often, almost nightly, throughout the spring of 1959, I had feared for my life. Solitude is the playfield of Satan. I cannot describe the depths of my loneliness and distress” (*PF*, p. 74). Here at least, Kinbote doesn’t seem to care much about Shade’s poem—and, given his abject loneliness, it is perhaps not surprising that he has nothing to say about these rather staid lines. No doubt most readers find Kinbote’s writings about himself and Zembla extraordinary in their imagination and poetry—and amusing and appalling in their egotism—but they are not particularly useful for myself and other critical readers interested in how Shade’s poem works, and its distinctiveness as a literary text.

Pale Fire is often invoked as a paradigmatic instance of late or limit modernism, metafiction, or postmodernism *avant la lettre*, in global characterizations of the novel’s

narrative or genre (usually in terms of epistemological or ontological undecidability) that eschew close analysis of particular passages.⁴⁵ This task has largely been left to those working in the rather isolated—and isolationist—field of Nabokov studies.⁴⁶ As Will Norman points out, within this field, *Pale Fire* and, to a lesser extent, *Ada or Ardor* “have been the battlegrounds over which the debates about how to read Nabokov have been fought.”⁴⁷ These debates have largely followed the course set by Brian Boyd, whose influence on Nabokov studies is difficult to overstate. In his first book, *Nabokov’s Ada* (1985, revised 2001), Boyd elaborates on Nabokov’s own analogy between reading and solving chess problems: texts initially set up a “resistance” to being understood, but “by finding an allusion, ... locating the precise source of a teasing echo, ... [or] catching an obscure pun,” readers identify “solutions” to the “myriad little problems” set by the author.⁴⁸ Boyd adopts the same approach in his critical biographies and in *Nabokov’s Pale Fire* (1999), which again conceives “the relationship between author and reader” as akin to “that between problem-composer and problem-solver” (*NPF*, p. 9).⁴⁹ This methodology is rigidly applied, with more or less every aspect of Nabokov’s writing described in terms of “problems” and “solutions.” That Boyd defends his approach by referring to Nabokov’s own belief in the homology between reading and problem-solving (*NPF*, pp. 122, 256) registers the extent to which this approach is essentially authorial intentionalism on a higher plane, the critic deferring not only to the author’s apparent views about how a specific work should be interpreted, but also to those about how *all* literature can or should be read.⁵⁰ That *Pale Fire* is in part a parody of biographical scholarship has not had the effect of abating the overt intentionalism of much Nabokov criticism, and those such as David Lodge, Michael Wood, and Martin Hägglund who have objected to this tendency have notably been met with short shrift.⁵¹ For the moment, however, I want to set aside this

legitimate complaint and consider the implications of Boyd's approach for debates—or, as I will suggest, the present lack of debate—about how to read Nabokov.

The influence of Boyd's approach is most apparent in accounts which expressly challenge his own; later critics might disagree with Boyd's specific conclusions, but they predominantly read Nabokov on his terms. Thomas Karshan, for instance, argues, *pace* Boyd, that Nabokov should be read "playfully" rather than for "definite truth," because *Pale Fire* is not a "puzzle" with a single correct solution, but a "game" that resists final resolution; "after all, if it were a soluble puzzle, its art would be exhausted once the puzzle was solved."⁵² Despite the apparent opposition, Karshan essentially agrees with Boyd that reading is a matter of trying to solve problems. The suggestion that art is exhausted once understood exemplifies the paucity of such cerebral accounts, which seem indifferent to the affective dimensions of reading. Even Michael Wood—to my mind the most sensitive and affective reader of Nabokov—seems unable to free himself of epistemological preoccupations; though he suggests that, as readers of Nabokov, "we shall almost certainly lose ... our certainty," he hastily adds that "to lose certainty is not to lose understanding or knowledge," as though uncertainty needed to be recuperated for epistemology.⁵³ In a sense, Nabokov criticism marks a collective failure to perceive reading as something richer—something more interesting and more troubling—than the trials of trying, and sometimes failing, to know a text. Like Rorty reading the anthology of essays on *Heart of Darkness*, we have little sense of these critics being enraptured or destabilized by Nabokov's writing.

Nabokov studies has recently undergone a belated historicist turn, with scholars showing themselves increasingly willing to transgress the author's prohibition against introducing biographical, social, economic, or political context.⁵⁴ These attempts to historicize Nabokov are often accompanied by an understandably weary,

but nevertheless insufficiently critical, attitude towards the interpretative strategies of previous critics, as though the question of how to read Nabokov had indeed been solved. Norman, for instance, characterizes “close reading and annotation” as the “traditional” (ahistorical) approach to Nabokov—as though “annotation” and “close reading” were synonymous, and there were only one way of reading closely.⁵⁵ Valuable as these recent historicist studies undoubtedly are, they risk abandoning the ground of reading wholesale, rather than critiquing—and exploring alternatives to—the excessively epistemological and affectively desensitized model of textual analysis. By contrast with the problem-solving approach that has dominated Nabokov criticism, the rest of this article aims to show how a critical orientation that embraces the feelings the writing gives rise to—and especially those readerly *feelings* of uncertainty and doubt in the face of textual complexity—enables us to better describe what is singular about Nabokov’s fiction.

VII

The “problem” which has obsessively preoccupied most Nabokovian critics of *Pale Fire* concerns a debate about which character “really” wrote which sections of the novel.⁵⁶ This preoccupation is perhaps not surprising, given the novel’s *mise en abyme* narrative structure and Kinbote’s manifestly unreliable narration. The strange echoes and repetitions of motifs, descriptive details, and intertextual allusions across Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s commentary have been the basis for several increasingly wild “theories of authorship”: that Shade wrote both poem and commentary; that Kinbote is the sole author; and, most outlandish of all, Boyd’s claim that the ghost of the poet’s dead daughter, Hazel Shade, influenced her father as he wrote the poem,

and that both father and daughter posthumously influence Kinbote as he writes the commentary.⁵⁷ The shared premise of these theories is that the echoes in the novel are “not incidental ornaments but signposts to concealed sense” (*NPF*, p. 151)—puzzles Nabokov sets the reader. Like Wood, I like the “echoes” and “unresolved difference” between the two parts of the novel, and simply “can’t see the interpretative need for the claim that either of these characters has invented the other.”⁵⁸ The “problem” of internal authorship only arises if one assumes that everything in the novel should be accounted for in terms of authorial design, rather than conceived of as elements of a strange and beguiling fictional world intricately imagined by readers.

The most frequently cited evidence for the necessity of such theories is a passage from “Pale Fire” where Shade describes his vision of a “tall white fountain” (*PF*, p. 47) after suffering a heart attack, a vision he initially takes to be a glimpse of the afterlife. In his search for corroboration, Shade reads of someone else having a similar vision, only to discover that the newspaper article contained a crucial misprint—“*Mountain*, not *fountain*. The majestic touch” (*PF*, p. 50). This prompts the following revelation:

But all at once it dawned on me that *this*
Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
But topsy-turvical coincidence,
Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
Of correlated pattern in the game

... Making ornaments

Of accidents and possibilities. (*PF*, p. 50)

Most critics follow Boyd in inferring from the passage that Shade resolves to examine his world so as to discern the design of its “author,” and treat this as a model for how to read the novel. Yet we might just as easily construe knowledge in Rortyan terms as a fundamentally human creation, and place emphasis on the *making* of “ornaments” from “accidents and possibilities,” as Karshan does: “Shade contends that we must abandon the ‘dream’ of absolute and final truth, instead weaving a ‘web of sense’ out of ‘topsy-turvical coincidence.’”⁵⁹ More problematic, however, is the implicit contention that the poem should be treated as a methodological instruction or allegory, which once again reverts to the questionable assumption that literature can or should only be read as the author supposedly intended.

The way that language takes on meanings in excess of our intentions is in fact dramatized by one of the most frequently cited passages in the novel, which I want to discuss at some length—the opening of “Pale Fire.” Here are the first four lines of Shade’s poem and the beginning of Kinbote’s commentary:

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
By the false azure in the windowpane;
I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky. (*PF*, p. 33)

The image in these opening lines evidently refers to a bird knocking itself out, in full flight, against the outer surface of a glass pane in which a mirrored sky,

with its slightly darker tint and slightly slower cloud, presents the illusion of continued space. We can visualize John Shade in his early boyhood, a physically unattractive but otherwise beautifully developed lad, experiencing his first eschatological shock (*PF*, p. 73)

Boyd is again the most influential interpreter of this passage, which he returns to numerous times in *Nabokov's Pale Fire*:

As we learn more about Shade's lifelong attempt to understand a world where life is surrounded by death, we realize the full resonance of these opening lines: that he is projecting himself in imagination into the waxwing, as if it were somehow still flying beyond death, and into the reflected azure of the window, as if that were the cloudlessness of some hereafter, even as he stands looking at "the smudge of ashen fluff" of the dead bird's little body. (*NPF*, p. 25)

Boyd later adds that Shade "now lives on in this blue world of the beyond," and the opening lines therefore have a "richer significance" and "mean more than he ever intended" (*NPF*, p. 217). Shortly, we will consider how Boyd follows Kinbote in domesticating the complexity of the emphatic series of first-person identifications at the beginning of the poem. But for the moment, I want to question whether this speculation about Shade surviving death amounts to "the full resonance" of these lines. Can they be paraphrased so neatly without loss of meaning or effect?

VIII

Consider the weighty use of the past tense. Kinbote, perhaps unsurprisingly given his conspicuous sexual interest in young boys, reads this as an invocation of Shade's childhood; Boyd equally unsurprisingly connects the tense with Shade's apparent survival after death; and Wood, dismissing this reading as "entirely plausible but not all that interesting," instead proposes that Shade is "remembering an occasion on which he literally died and did not die"—when his heart convulsed and temporarily stopped.⁶⁰ Though I share Wood's well-founded scepticism of otherworldly interpretations, he uncharacteristically overlooks how and why the passage engenders the kind of speculation made by Boyd; once aware of Shade's death, it is difficult *not* to hear a painful dramatic irony in the past tense. The way the surrounding narrative alters the affective resonance of the lines underscores how words can mean more than their authors intend—something as true of Nabokov as of Shade—and thus that, as Rorty suggests, we read *contextually*, "in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you." The real question is what kinds of contexts we consider useful, interesting, or relevant for different kinds of purposes. For readers concerned with "how the text works," Shade's death (which is announced in the very first sentence of the novel) seems to me more salient than Nabokov's purported views about the afterlife or the state of the American publication industry in the mid-twentieth century.

The story of the Shades similarly impinges upon the first line in a less obvious but no less consequential way in the possible allusion of "waxwing" to Icarus and Daedalus—a myth of peculiar significance in a poem about a father's grief for his drowned child. The poem notably dwells on the uncertainty about whether Hazel's death was accident or suicide, strongly implying the latter (*PF*, p. 50), and touches on the question of whether the girl's parents were in any way culpable. Shade—perhaps

rather conceitedly—seems to partly blame himself for passing on to his daughter his own bad looks (*PF*, p. 43), though, as Wood shrewdly points out, Shade seems not to recognize the possibility that his preoccupation with Hazel's appearance and sexual desirability might have contributed to her unhappiness.⁶¹ The blurring or confusion of accident and (self-)destruction is similarly played out in the opening end rhyme, "slain," with its striking suggestion that the waxwing is deliberately and violently slaughtered rather than that it inadvertently kills itself, the note of accusation amplified by the unusual syntax and the stressed preposition at the beginning of the second line. Kinbote is surely right that "false azure" refers to the illusion of continued space in the window's reflection, but "false" also disconcertingly introduces an ethical note. The emphasis placed on distinguishing the actual from the illusory only brings into sharper relief the degree to which these deceptively complex lines resist straightforward comprehension; Boyd might characterize them as "vivid, immediate, [and] accessible," but I am not so sure.⁶²

At the heart of the complexity of these lines is their ambiguous metaphoricity, which centers around the "shadow" of the opening line. Meanwhile, by virtue of the repetition of personal pronouns, the dearth of prepositions, and the use of punctuation that declines to specify the semantic relationships between clauses, it remains unclear whether one, two, or three moments in time are being described. The sentence might be read as a chronological description, the speaker first identifying with the shadow of the waxwing and then the smudge of ashen fluff, and then (literally or imaginatively?) living and flying on in the reflected sky. Or we might read the "I" of the first two clauses as identical, the speaker characterizing his past self as both body ("ashen fluff") and disembodied spirit ("shadow"), before the dash signals a transformation to another kind of selfhood that persists beyond death. Or this might be a series of empathetic

identifications with different phenomena, the speaker imagining being a bird's shadow, then its dead body, and finally a waxwing which is not killed by the windowpane. The last perhaps seems most likely, and yet presents the greatest barrier to the imagination—*can* we envision what it would be like to be an effect of light or a smudge of unfeeling matter? These richly suggestive lines remain subtly, stubbornly indeterminate, inviting many such readings without allowing the reader to finally settle on one or another—and it is precisely their elusiveness that compels me to repeatedly return to them. Like much of the novel, the passage at once provokes and ultimately confounds final comprehension, whilst the ethical charge of “slain” and “false” ups the affective stakes, raising the worry that not understanding these lines might in some sense amount to a moral failing. The feeling that the writing is at once soliciting and wryly withholding definite explication is part of what gets lost when other critics claim to know what is “really” going on in this text. This is not to abandon the critical aspiration to do justice to the singularity of the work (even if we recognize that a final reading is ultimately unattainable), but to say that there are better—more intricate, interesting, and compelling—ways of describing texts than by identifying and “solving” quasi-ontological problems.

The literary qualities of the passage discussed above are easy enough to observe, yet have attracted no critical comment, despite countless readings. This might be because critics have considered them too obvious or inconsequential to mention, but I suspect not; it seems more likely that these qualities are passed over because they slow down or resist incorporation into grander and more assured accounts of the novel. I am certainly not claiming to have captured the “full resonance” of these lines; indeed, part of my argument, following Rorty, is precisely that we should abandon the notion of exhaustive commentary, because texts continue to be read in

different contexts and described in different vocabularies. But I am suggesting that a preoccupation with “knowing” *Pale Fire* has impeded critics from effectively describing what is distinctive about Nabokov’s writing.

The literary qualities of the opening of Shade’s poem also illustrate the kinds of practical difficulties surface reading can face when confronted with a textual example. Is reading the past tense in the light of Shade’s death to look “*through*” rather than “*at*” the passage? Do potential allusions of great emotional significance—in this case, to a mythical bereaved parent—belong to the text’s surface or depth? Which of the figurative readings invited by the opening lines are “apprehensible,” and which “hidden”? Not much is to be gained by making distinctions of this kind—and, of course, one of the reasons that I chose this passage is precisely because it dramatizes the difficulties of distinguishing surface from depth, and object from effect. It is in this sense that surface reading, in reifying the figure of text as object, risks tethering itself to a naive belief that literary works have intrinsic meanings in and of themselves, rather than in the event of being read.

IX

Nabokov critics have tended to take an excessively epistemological approach to *Pale Fire* primarily because of the novel’s manifest narrative and stylistic complexity. However, the novel also conspicuously foregrounds the ways in which a preoccupation with knowing the text can disable or overwhelm other kinds of responses, including ethical and affective ones. Perhaps the most flagrant examples of this are the elaborate analogies which populate Nabokov’s fiction. This is Kinbote’s allegory about how “a good Zemblan Christian” feels about the afterlife, as something which cannot

be known but which one places a benevolent faith in:

To take a homely example: little Christopher's family is about to migrate to a distant colony where his father has been assigned to a lifetime post. Little Christopher, a frail lad of nine or ten, relies completely (so completely, in fact, as to blot out the very awareness of this reliance) on his elders' arranging all the details of departure, passage and arrival. He cannot imagine, nor does he try to imagine, the particular aspects of the new place awaiting him but he is dimly and comfortably convinced that it will be even better than his homestead, with the big oak, and the mountain, and his pony, and the park, and the stable, and Grimm, the old groom, who has a way of fondling him whenever nobody is around. (*PF*, pp. 219-220)

This "example" may be many things, but I suspect most readers do not find it "homely"—comfortable, friendly, everyday—as Kinbote does. What is so discomfiting about the passage is, of course, the serenity with which the sexual abuse of a child is alluded to and the suggestion that, far from harming him, this abuse is merely part of the routine pleasures of his domestic life. The tale naturally reflects poorly on the teller, in hinting at Kinbote's idealization of pederasty and his indifference to the feelings of its victims, whether they be real or imagined. But it simply makes no sense to think about the "truth" or "reality" of this scene, and to do so would be to miss what is at once troubling and comic about this moment in the novel.

The claim of overtly fictional characters on readers' feelings and ethical interests is not a peculiarity of this text's hypothetical and counterfactual descriptions, but has much larger implications for our understanding of Nabokov's fiction. Against the grain

of Nabokov criticism, Ellen Pifer has persuasively argued for a greater attention to the novels' "interest in human beings, not only as artists and dreamers but as ethical beings."⁶³ However, Pifer's emphasis on studying "the nature of each character's unique reality" ultimately falls back on a naive view of characters simply as fictional persons, shorn of the particularity of their representation.⁶⁴ John Frow has explored the tension between "thinking of characters as pieces of writing or imaging, and thinking of them as person-like entities," and argued that "these two ways of thinking about character are logically difficult to hold together; and yet we do so in our every encounter with fictional character: the problem is to find a language in which to convey this ontological hybridity."⁶⁵ This more nuanced account gets us closer to the peculiarity of Nabokov's novel, which at once foregrounds the fictionality of its characters and mobilizes feelings of ethical discomfort, making readers acutely aware of the surprising similarity between our feelings towards living persons and fictional characters—what Frow describes as "the processes of affective engagement by which textual constructs acquire their hold on readers, acting on us *as though* they were real."⁶⁶ Part of what makes *Pale Fire* such an unusual novel is the undeterminable fictionality of its compelling central character (or characters?), Charles Kinbote, aka King Charles Xavier "The Beloved." Peter J. Rabinowitz has suggested that, because it "makes us more aware of the novel as art, as construct," *Pale Fire* is "generally unmoving, witty and brilliant as it may be."⁶⁷ But for myself—and, I suspect, for many other readers captivated by Nabokov's writing—what is remarkable about the novel is precisely that it is deeply moving despite its flaunted fictionality.

Through a reading of *Pale Fire* animated by Rorty's descriptions of "liberal irony" and "inspired reading," which is less epistemological and more affective in its orientation, I have tried to show the need for critics to be more honest and explicit about the ways that literary works elude our understanding, and to illustrate that close readings that embrace and explore such frustrations of understanding can, paradoxically, lead to better descriptions of texts. This frustration should, in turn, also encourage us to be more provisional—and perhaps more pragmatist—about our critical methods. To return to one salient example, the structuring metaphor of surface reading has made possible a compelling and persuasive theoretical critique of prior interpretative strategies that are insufficiently attentive to the texture of literary writing—but, when taken as a truth about how literary works "really" are, it threatens to impede rather than enable engaged critical description. What Rorty's thought offers to literary critics today is not only a salutary reminder about the constructed nature of disciplinary knowledge—and especially the knowledge of what literary works are—but also a challenge to explore what else we might do with texts other than know them.

Notes

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (London: Vintage, 1989), p. 289; hereafter cited as *PF*.

² Many scholars have considered the potential relationships between pragmatism, literature, and literary criticism, most obviously Richard Poirier and David L. Hall; my concern is specifically with the opportunities that Rorty's neo-pragmatism opens up for critics concerned with issues of interpretative method. Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992); David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1994).

³ Günter Leypoldt, "Uses of Metaphor: Richard Rorty's Literary Criticism and the

Poetics of World-Making,” *New Literary History* 39, no. 1 (2008): p. 145.

⁴ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), *passim*. In this article, I use “singularity” to describe what is peculiar or distinctive about a given text—what makes it importantly different to read *this* work rather than another—without reference to Attridge’s related theorizations of alterity. Attridge has recently elaborated on and defended his understanding of the singularity of literature in *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), pp. 1-108.

⁵ Rita Felski, “Introduction,” *Interpretation and its Rivals*, special issue of *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (2014): p. v. Felski and Elizabeth S. Anker have recently reiterated the claim that literary studies is in the midst of “the method wars” in their introduction to *Critique and Postcritique*. “Introduction,” in *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Anker and Felski (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2017), p. 2.

⁶ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 146, 144; hereafter cited as *CIS*.

⁷ Early responses to Rorty’s reading in Nabokov scholarship include: John Burt Foster Jr., “Not T. S. Eliot, but Proust: Re-visionary Modernism in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 28, no. 1 (1991): p. 67, n25; Julian W. Connolly, *Nabokov’s Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), p. 7. Leona Toker and David Rampton have addressed Rorty’s reading in more depth. Toker, “Liberal Ironists and the ‘Gaudily Painted Savage’: On Richard Rorty’s Reading of Vladimir Nabokov,” *Nabokov Studies* 1 (1994): pp. 195-206; Rampton, “The Last Word in Nabokov Criticism,” *Cycnos* 10 (1993): pp. 159-65. Most of the significant recent monographs on Nabokov contain only slight references to Rorty, for instance: Brian Boyd, *Nabokov’s Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), hereafter cited as *NPF*; and Leland de la

Durantaye, *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007). Michael Wood's *The Magician's Doubts* is one notable exception, though Wood focuses on a detail of Rorty's reading, rather than its larger implications. *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 65.

⁸ The preposition of my title is meant in each of the ways Nicholas Royle elaborates in *After Derrida* - in the manner of, later in time than, and in search of. *After Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1995), p. 2.

⁹ Richard Rorty, "Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies: An Interview with Richard Rorty," by E. P. Ragg, *Philosophy and Literature* 26, no. 2 (2002): p. 384.

¹⁰ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979). Rorty later described his influential book as "just a tract saying we don't need the notion of representation. I have been saying it over and over again ever since." Richard Rorty, "Is the Truth out There?," interview by Sean Sayers, *Times Higher Education*, 6 June 1997, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/is-the-truth-out-there/100472.article>.

¹¹ Rorty similarly argues: "The great Western philosophers should be read as therapeutic rather than as constructive: as having told us what problems *not* to discuss It would be an oversimplification to say that the task of philosophy is to stop people from thinking of things in obsolete terms But that is a certainly large part of their job. ... To sluff off an obsolete terminology makes us more sensitive to the life about us, for it helps us to stop trying to cut new, recalcitrant material to fit old patterns." *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), p. 6.

¹² Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), p. 91. Richard J. Bernstein has lamented what he characterizes as Rorty's loss of patience with and faith in philosophical argument. "Richard Rorty's Deep Humanism," *New Literary History* 39, no. 1 (2008): pp. 24-5.

¹³ Richard Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises," in *The Rorty Reader*, ed. Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 393. Rorty's other high assessments of the novel include his claim that "novels rather than moral treatises are the most useful vehicles of moral education," and his suggestion that "the novel of moral protest, rather than the philosophical treatise," is "the genre in which the West excelled." *Truth and Progress*, p. 12; *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), p. 68.

¹⁴ Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens," in *Essays on Heidegger*, p. 74.

¹⁵ Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism," p. 246.

¹⁶ Richard Rorty, "Introduction," in *Pale Fire*, by Vladimir Nabokov (Germany: Everyman's Library, 1992), pp. x-xv.

¹⁷ Rorty, "Introduction," pp. xvi, xviii.

¹⁸ Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism," pp. 250-1, 255.

¹⁹ Simon Stow, "The Return of Charles Kinbote: Nabokov on Rorty," *Philosophy and Literature* 23, no. 1 (1999): pp. 74, 72.

²⁰ E. D. Hirsch Jr., "Rorty and the Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," *New Literary History* 39, no. 1 (2008): p. 38.

²¹ The absence of the close reading of style is most marked in Rorty's most textually-engaged piece of literary criticism: "The barber of Kasbeam" chapter in *Contingency*,

Irony, and Solidarity. Rorty's primary evidence for interpreting *Lolita* as an allegory of inattention is the following: "In Kasbeam a very old barber gave me a very mediocre haircut: he babbled of a baseball-playing son of his, and, at every explodent, spat into my neck, and every now and then wiped his glasses on my sheet-wrap, or interrupted his tremulous scissor work to produce faded newspaper clippings, and so inattentive was I that it came as a shock to realize as he pointed to an easelled photograph among the ancient gray lotions, that the moustached young ball player had been dead for the last thirty years." Rorty claims that "the reader of *Lolita* who missed that sentence about the barber the first time around ... [is] revealed to himself as, if not hypocritical, at least cruelly incurious" (pp. 163-4). This claim is premised on a close observation about the novel's narrative, yet Rorty makes no comment about the stylistic qualities of the passage—a silence all the more conspicuous because such a reading might bolster his interpretation. Note how the beginning of this meandering sentence suggests that its subject will be a comic vignette—an expectation initially sustained, for instance, through the droll repetitions ("very old" and "very mediocre"), and the density of bilabial plosives ("babbled," "explodent," and "spat") to describe the spitting barber—only for the tone to take a sudden turn, involving readers in the shock of Humbert's realization. Indeed, part of the sentence's affective charge is produced precisely by the *directness* with which Humbert tells us what he—and, by association, we readers—had failed to notice. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (Great Britain: Penguin, 2010), p. 213.

²² Richard Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), p. 104; hereafter cited as PP.

²³ Richard Rorty, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," in

Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980 (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 151.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See, for instance: Jacques Derrida, "Literature in Secret: An Impossible Filiation," in *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 117-158; J. Hillis Miller, "Derrida's Topographies," in *Topographies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 291-315; Attridge, *The Work of Literature*, pp. 252-8.

²⁶ Nicholas M. Gaskill, "Experience and Signs: Towards a Pragmatist Literary Criticism," *New Literary History* 39, no. 1 (2008): p. 177.

²⁷ Attridge, *The Work of Literature*, p. 37.

²⁸ Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 23.

²⁹ Richard Rorty, "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature," in *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 125-140; hereafter cited as IV.

³⁰ Deidre Shauna Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 1.

³¹ This reticence is perhaps most conspicuous in criticism which is explicitly concerned with affect, manifest both in the propensity towards abstruse style (for instance, Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual*), and in the tendency to describe affect in broad socio-political terms (as in Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2002); *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2011). For discussion of the affective turn in the humanities, see Patricia Ticineto Clough's introduction to *The Affective Turn*:

Theorizing the Social, ed. Clough and Jean Halley (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2007), pp. 1-33. As long ago as 2007, Sianne Ngai described a “present spotlight on emotion in literary criticism.” *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), p. 24.

³² Rita Felski, “Suspicious Minds,” *Poetics Today* 32, no. 2 (2011): p. 216. See also Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015).

³³ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): pp. 1-21.

³⁴ Kristina Straub has voiced similar doubts in “The Suspicious Reader Surprised, Or, What I Learned from ‘Surface Reading,’” *The Eighteenth Century* 54, no. 1 (2013): p. 139.

³⁵ Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading,” p. 9.

³⁶ Straub, “The Suspicious Reader Surprised,” p. 139.

³⁷ The practical difficulties faced by surface reading are exemplified by Heather Love’s response to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*; though a brilliant reading, Love in fact uses surface and depth to discuss the degree to which the novel enables—and disables—the possibility of empathetic identification with a character, rather than with respect to the “surface” and “depth” of the text itself. “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): pp. 383-7.

³⁸ Attridge makes perhaps the most persuasive and eloquent case for conceiving literary works as “events” of reading, but, as he points out, countless critics have implicitly or explicitly approached literature in this way; such an approach enables us to better describe “how a text works”—and ultimately why we care about it in the first place. Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 2.

³⁹ Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading,” pp. 13, 10.

⁴⁰ Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," p. 18.

⁴¹ Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, "Form and Explanation," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 3 (2017): 654. Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," p. 17.

⁴² Ellen Rooney, "Live Free or Describe: The Reading Effect and the Persistence of Form," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21, no. 3 (2010): p. 124.

⁴³ Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus and Heather Love, "Building a Better Description," *Representations* 135, no. 1, (2016): p. 13.

⁴⁴ Priscilla Meyer, Will Norman, Dale E. Peterson, Rachel Trousdale, and Yuri Leving, "Approaches to Teaching Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," *Nabokov Online Journal* 9 (2015): p. 2.

⁴⁵ See, for instance: John Barth, *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997), p. 203; Fredric Jameson, *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality* (London: Verso, 2016), pp. 2-3; Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 18-19; Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 15.

⁴⁶ Will Norman points out that *Lolita* is a notable exception, having had the good fortune to receive substantial critical attention outside of the near-hermetically sealed world of Nabokov scholarship. "Transitions in Nabokov Studies," *Literature Compass* 7, no. 10 (2010): pp. 968-9.

⁴⁷ Will Norman, *Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 152.

⁴⁸ Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness* (Christchurch, New Zealand: Cybereditions, 2001), pp. 19-21.

⁴⁹ The uniformity of Boyd's approach over several decades makes his stern warning

that “we must reject all claims to be able to reach truth through some sure method” (*NPF*, p. 7) ring rather hollow.

⁵⁰ Whether this is an accurate understanding of Nabokov’s own views is debatable; his famous claim that the good reader reads “not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine” emphasizes the body and bodily feeling in a way that seems incompatible with the cerebral mode of interpretation that has dominated the study of his fiction. *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Mariner Books, 1982), p. 6.

⁵¹ David Lodge, *The Practice of Writing* (London: Vintage, 2011), p. 162; Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, p. 186. See also the debate between Boyd and Hägglund in *New Literary History*: Boyd, “Nabokov, Time, and Timelessness: A Reply to Martin Hägglund,” *New Literary History* 37, no. 2 (2006): pp. 469-478; Hägglund, “Nabokov’s Afterlife: A Reply to Brian Boyd,” *New Literary History* 37, no. 2 (2006): pp. 479-481. Leland de la Durantaye’s *Style is Matter* exemplifies the persistence of intentionalism in Nabokov criticism; as Pifer points out, despite the book’s title, de la Durantaye is more interested in Nabokov’s expository statements than the style of the novels. Pifer, Review of *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, by Leland de la Durantaye, *Nabokov Studies* 11 (2007/2008), par. 1.

⁵² Thomas Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), pp. 204-5.

⁵³ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, p. 7.

⁵⁴ See: Dana Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2011); Norman, *Nabokov, History, and the Texture of Time*; Barbara Straumann, *Figurations of Exile in Hitchcock and Nabokov* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2008); Duncan White, *Nabokov and His Books* (Oxford: Oxford

Univ. Press, 2017).

⁵⁵ Norman, *Nabokov, History, and the Texture of Time*, p. 153.

⁵⁶ For summaries of this debate, see: Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, pp. 114-6; René Alladaye, *The Darker Shades of Pale Fire: An Investigation into a Literary Mystery* (Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2013), *passim*.

⁵⁷ Proponents of the "Shadean" hypothesis include Andrew Field, Julia Bader, Chris Ackerley, and Boyd in *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*; Page Stegner offers the most elaborate argument for Kinbote's authorship; in *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, Boyd abandoned the Shadean position in favor of his supernatural explanation. Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art: A Critical Narrative* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1967), pp. 291-322; Julia Bader, *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1972), pp. 31-56; Chris Ackerley, "Pale Fire: Three Notes towards a Thetic Solution," *Nabokov Studies* 2 (1995): pp. 87-103; Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), pp. 425-6; Page Stegner, *Escape Into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967), pp. 116-132; Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire*, *passim*.

⁵⁸ Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, p. 189. John Frow more pointedly refers to "the inherent absurdity of such readings." *Character and Person* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), p. 31.

⁵⁹ Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 204. Rorty himself seems to interpret the passage in a similar vein (*CIS*, p. 166, fn32).

⁶⁰ Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, p. 189.

⁶¹ Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, p. 194.

⁶² Brian Boyd, *Stalking Nabokov: Selected Essays* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2011), p. 345.

⁶³ Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), p. iii.

⁶⁴ Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel*, p. 117.

⁶⁵ Frow, *Character and Person*, p. 25.

⁶⁶ Frow, *Character and Person*, p. vi.

⁶⁷ Peter J. Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences," *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (1977): p. 139.